

ARTICLE

Whatever happened to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the Beatles' guru, and the “TM” movement?

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Email: dsawyer@meca.edu**Abstract**

This article redacts certain sections of the author's recent book on Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and the Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement. Specifically, it offers an updated overview—based on earlier studies—of the TM movement's development and what led to its enormous success, while also providing analysis of the movement using metrics gleaned from the academic study of new religious movements. The author places primary attention on assessing whether or not TM and its attendant philosophy constitutes a religion, and, based primarily on metrics offered by Bainbridge and Stark, argues that it is not only a religion but a variety of Neo-Hinduism. Attention is also given to the TM movement's deep appeal for the youth culture of the 1960s.

1 | INTRODUCTION

During the 1960s and 1970s, the United States, as well as Europe, experienced an unprecedented influx of gurus, lamas, yogis, and swamis from the so-called “mystic east,” but none of them was ever so successful at capturing the western imagination as Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1917–2008). The ever-smiling holy man from India, wrapped in white robes and sporting a flowing gray beard, was a guest on television talk shows; graced the covers of popular magazines; enjoyed the company of such celebrities as Mia Farrow, Mary Tyler Moore, and Clint Eastwood; and, introduced millions of stressed American workaholics to Transcendental Meditation. But given his enormous success, whatever happened to the giggling guru and why did the success of his movement wane? In a short book for Cambridge University Press' series on new religious movements (NRMs), *The Transcendental Meditation Movement* (2023), Cynthia Humes and I answer these and other questions while surveying and updating earlier, short academic studies offered by McCutchan (1977), Scott (1978), Wallis (2003), Humes (2005), Cowan and Bromley (2008), Williamson (2010), and Lowe (2010). There we give not only an updated overview of the movement's development, but a close consideration of how the Transcendental Meditation organization (TMO) appears through the lens of established metrics for assessing NRMs. And here, in this short article, I will share a few of our observations, focused mainly on the issue of whether or not TM and its attendant philosophy constitutes a religion.

The TM movement first emerged in India in 1955, when Brahmachari Mahesh Prasad Varma—not yet called Maharishi or “Great Seer”—announced his plan to enlighten the world in this generation by sharing the teachings of his guru, Swami Brahmananda Saraswati, a lineage holder in the *sampradaya* of Adi Shankara, the ninth century advocate of Advaita Vedanta philosophy. Unfortunately for the 38-year-old guru, the crowd gathered that day in Madras gave only a tepid response to his message, since they were already aware of Shankara's viewpoint and other speakers that day had also shared it. But everything changed 2 years later, when Varma, now titled Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, captured a new audience by traveling east to Hong Kong, Hawaii and Los Angeles.

In Los Angeles especially, Maharishi's teachings were met with enthusiasm, mainly by middle-aged members of the upper middle class, but also by a few celebrities, including Efreim Zimbalist Jr., then starring on the hit television series, *77 Sunset Strip*. This first group, numbering only 40 or 50, were deeply intrigued by Maharishi's message, including the view that consciousness could be expanded, resulting in inner peace and spiritual enlightenment, by practicing a simple meditation technique for 20 min, twice per day. Consequently, they were eager to help Maharishi share his teachings, though they were well aware that the majority of Americans likely did not share their positive response, given that this was one of the most ideologically and socially conservative periods in American history. Nonetheless, they set up lectures and hosted Maharishi at cocktail parties whenever possible.

Philip Goldberg, in his book *American Veda*, relates that in 1965, after 8 years of concerted effort, Maharishi's organization had only succeeded in teaching 220 people to meditate, but by the end of 1968, there were, surprisingly, nearly 5000 (2010, p. 162). What had changed in only 3 years to make such extraordinary growth possible? Maharishi's message had reached the burgeoning youth culture of the “flower power” generation, with its growing interest in altered states of consciousness, psychedelic drugs, and Asian religions. Specifically, a younger member of the TM group in Los Angeles, Jerry Jarvis, had been asked to give a series of talks at a local college, setting off a wave of interest in TM that rapidly spread among young people on other campuses, including Stanford and UCLA. In fact, news about Maharishi and TM spread through the college network—and the counterculture—at a fast pace, making clear that Maharishi, who was the only person qualified to teach the meditation technique, would have to train instructors if he ever hoped to meet the demand. These instructors—later called “initiators”—would initiate new meditators during a short *pūja* ceremony, delivered with incense, candle light, and Sanskrit prayers, after which initiates were given a special *mantra* to repeat silently at home.

Part of the reason the youth culture embraced Maharishi's message had to do with the fact that The Beatles, the most popular musical group ever to perform—then or now by most estimations—had learned TM, in the fall of 1967, and were broadcasting Maharishi's message in both their interviews and music. TM was the “next big thing” for them, as they told David Frost in an interview at that time (Goldman, 1988, p. 326), so in the spring of 1968, they set off for India, to train as initiators. In Rishikesh, they were joined at Maharishi's ashram not only by Mia Farrow, Donovan, Mike Love (a member of the Beach Boys), and other celebrities, but by 50 other young people eager to spread the guru's message. Unfortunately, John, Paul, George, and Ringo left the training course after only a few weeks, claiming that Maharishi had solicited sex from several of his female students (Ebon, 1975, p. xii), but the upside of the training course for Maharishi was that he now had a group of TM teachers to deploy in service to his mission.

Whether or not Maharishi had broken his monastic vow of celibacy never became clear, and George, Paul, and Ringo later apologized for believing what they had heard only as gossip, but their separation didn't slow down the TM movement's growth. Ian MacDonald has pointed out the reason for this, sharing that, “The Beatles weren't so much causing the social and psychological changes of that era as mirroring them” (MacDonald, 2005, p. 31). What had led the so-called Fab Four to Maharishi and Asian religions is exactly what had led other members of the “love generation” in that direction, so even after the Beatles' exit, other young people kept coming. By 1973, after several training courses in India, Spain, and Italy, Maharishi had trained more than 3000 TM teachers—and would soon add thousands more (Forem, 1973, p. 218). The ramification was exactly this: a few thousand “hippie kids” meditating was one thing, but thousands of them able to teach TM was quite another. Now Maharishi could offer meditation courses in cities all over America and the world. But would citizens from the mainstream be drawn to study meditation with “hippies” proffering mantras and Hindu wisdom? It seemed unlikely, and, at first, it proved unlikely.

By the early 1970s, Maharishi had realized that his most popular audience, members of the youth culture, was actually holding him back from reaching the general public. Peace protests against the Viet Nam War, “love-ins,” drug use (especially with psychedelics), and other activities of the youth culture had created a definite chip on the shoulder of mainstream society. According to many middle-class Americans, Maharishi was hanging out with the “freaks,” and he looked like a “freak” himself, with his robes, long hair, and beard. Realizing the nature of this problem, Maharishi sought to remedy it by having his students cut their hair, shave their beards (or legs), and put away their bell bottoms, mini skirts and love beads. These were replaced with inexpensive suits for the men and modest dresses for the ladies. In addition, Maharishi hoped to appeal to mainstream America by emphasizing that his traditional Hindu message was not in fact Hinduism, but rather a scientifically proven technique of stress release—“tranquility without pills” became not only a catch phrase of the movement but the title of an early book delivering Maharishi’s message to the public (Robbins & Fisher, 1973).

In 1970, Keith Wallace, a Ph.D. student in physiology at UCLA, published the results of a study showing that TM triggered a state of deep rest. This study was replicated by Wallace, with the help of Herbert Benson, at Harvard Medical School in 1972, and subsequently published in the *Scientific American* (Wallace & Benson, 1972). Here was solid evidence of TM’s value for improving health. Leveraging this message in 1974, Harold Bloomfield, a TM-friendly psychiatrist, published, with the help of colleagues, *TM: Discovering Inner Energy and Overcoming Stress* (Bloomfield et al., 1974), and for a short time, Bloomfield became a media star. Other books praising TM’s health benefits followed, and Maharishi’s Vedanta philosophy was recast for the public as the Science of Creative Intelligence. By downplaying his spiritual message and asserting his contention that TM was the key to wellness, Maharishi’s movement took off like the proverbial skyrocket, with eager members from all walks of life lining up at his meditation centers to find a healthy substitute for tranquilizers, alcohol and cigarettes. The new message worked brilliantly—but only for a short while.

By 1978, the number of people who had learned TM in the U.S. had risen to more than a million, but along with success came failure. Specifically, in 1976, a court case in New Jersey was convened to decide whether or not teaching TM in public schools—which had become an initiative of the TM movement—was a breach of the separation of Church and State. The court decided against Maharishi’s organization (*TM in Court*, 1978, p. 58), and the court’s decision became pivotal to the movement’s trajectory. Partially in response to the judgment, Maharishi decided to shift his organization’s attention away from teaching meditation to the general public, instead focusing its attention inward. That same year, 1976, he had begun developing a set of new techniques called the Sidhis program that, he and his organization’s leadership contended, could amplify the spiritual and physical benefits of TM. Moreover, the guru claimed that preliminary studies suggested that when “TMers” (as they called themselves) practiced TM and the Sidhis as a group, a “super radiance” effect was created that was more than the sum of its parts. Consequently and subsequently, in the summer of 1979, at a course for dedicated meditators in Amherst, Massachusetts, Maharishi urged his followers to migrate to Fairfield, Iowa, to do their meditations together at his recently established Maharishi International University. From there, they would broadcast beneficial vibrations to the world, working remotely to enlighten everyone on the planet.

The events noted in the last paragraph highlighted a division in the TM movement that had been hiding in plain sight for more than 10 years. Maharishi’s first wave of success had come with the youth culture, who had embraced his teachings in the hopes of expanding their consciousness into a Buddha-like state of awakening, but his largest success had come when he shifted his message toward the benefits of TM for health and wellness, dropping as much pretense of spirituality as possible. In fact, his teachers had been cautioned by the guru not to bring up the spiritual content and implications of his teachings, downplaying the fact that they sang of Hindu gods during the puja ceremony performed at initiations. This division in the TM movement, characterized by *insiders*, drawn mainly from the youth culture attracted to spiritual growth, and *outsiders*, casual practitioners hoping for better health and drawn from the mainstream, grew more pronounced and more obvious once the TMO moved in with itself in Iowa. Maharishi soon built two enormous golden domes in Fairfield, one for men and one for women, where Sidhas (those practicing the Sidhis) could sit together in meditation, hoping via super radiance to enlighten the world while having removed themselves from it.

This division between *insider* TMers and *outsider* TMers is key for understanding investigations into whether or not the TM movement is religious in nature, and to make this clear, we employed in our analysis categories suggested by Bainbridge and Stark (2003, p. 64). Bainbridge and Stark argue that NRMs commonly fall into one of three types depending upon the relationship of individuals to the group: *audience cults*, *client cults*, and *cult movements*. The vast majority of folks who ever learned TM—the *outsiders*—fall into the first two groups, in that they were either in the *audience* of people who received their mantras and simply went home to practice by themselves, having no further contact with the TMO, or they held onto a weak connection with the TMO, preferring to seek advice now and then as clients. But the *insiders*, numbering only a few thousand, who had embraced Maharishi's teachings as their personal worldview, and who hoped to reach "Cosmic Consciousness" and create an "Age of Enlightenment," fit Bainbridge and Stark's descriptors of a *cult movement* (referencing the word *cult* in terms of its lexical definition, while today—in consideration of the negative connotations for "cult"—the preferred academic term is *NRM*). This latter group adopted Maharishi's philosophy (a slightly modified form of Advaita Vedanta) with all the phenomenological characteristics of a religion. Once settled in Iowa, where they were free to interact only with other insiders, this division between those on the inside and other TMers grew wider. Consequently, the outsider TMers can mainly be assessed as non-religious, while the *insiders*—who accepted Maharishi's offerings as both a lifestyle and ideology—meet Bainbridge and Stark's descriptors of a cult movement.

Understanding this separation helps explain why TM waned. Maharishi no longer focused his movement's attention on the public, preferring to isolate his insiders with each other. Furthermore, by 1978 the general public had witnessed several off-putting compromises of Maharishi's message about TM as the key to wellness, including the judgment of the New Jersey court that TM involved religion and Maharishi's own claim that practicing his Sidhis program could result in meditators being able to fly. This claim was too odd and extravagant for the everyday American. So even as the guru was closing most of his TM centers, fewer and fewer members of the public were becoming interested in TM.

Peter McWilliams, a former TMer, has offered a contrary but plausible rationale for why Maharishi turned his movement's attention inward, suggesting that the guru created the Sidhis program "to turn off the casual meditator while drawing the devout believers closer to him" (McWilliams, 1994, p. 410). *Outsider* TMers practiced their TM at home, with little to no knowledge of what was happening on the inside, while *insiders* in Fairfield were increasingly moving toward Bainbridge and Stark's *cult movement* profile. For instance, during the 1980s and 1990s, Maharishi crafted another set of new offerings, together called Maharishi Ayur Veda (MAV). Ayur Veda, literally the "Knowledge of Life," is the basis for traditional medicine in India, but Maharishi, with the help of several Ayur Vedic pandits, claimed he had improved and purified the traditional practices into more beneficial forms. Those forms, including food supplements, traditional cures, massage techniques, oil treatments, rituals and astrology, could greatly enhance his devotees' growth to enlightenment (Sharma & Clark, 1998). This increasing turn toward Hinduism was mostly unrecognized by *outsider* TMers, but *insiders*, believing their guru knew best, embraced the MAV offerings with enthusiasm.

Maharishi appointed Deepak Chopra, a young Indian physician working in Boston, to head his MAV programs, and Chopra became an effective spokesperson for the movement, sometimes attracting celebrities to his clinic in Massachusetts. Chopra was an incredible asset to the TMO, but in 1993 he broke away from Maharishi after a meeting in the guru's newly established international headquarters, located in Voldrop, Holland. Chopra had grown uncomfortable with the TMO's claim that its understanding of Ayur Veda was superior to that of traditional Indian culture. He was also weary of the growing corporate, top-down hierarchy of the TMO, and so, longing for more autonomy, he told Maharishi it was probably best if he go his own way. Maharishi expressed no initial animosity toward him, but soon after, on 16 July 1993, the Maharishi National Council of the Age of Enlightenment issued directives to the few TM centers that remained, telling them to cease promoting Chopra's books, classes and recordings. Maharishi wanted full control of his brand, and of Ayur Veda in general, so all connections with Chopra were abandoned.

Back in Fairfield, the inward drift of the TMO intensified during the 1990s and early 2000s, but not everyone there was satisfied with the situation. Several groups of *insiders* began to find themselves less comfortable inside than others. For instance, they began looking elsewhere for Ayur Veda programs that seemed entirely the same as MAV

(though offered at a lower price); or they sought lectures from other gurus (including Sri Sri Ravi Shankar); or they began to question why, after more than 30 years of regular practice, they had not yet reached Cosmic Consciousness; or they sought answers to allegations that Maharishi was having love affairs; or they felt uncomfortable with the definite drift of the TMO toward authoritarian control.

This last point references a change in leadership structure and style that had occurred slowly over 30 years. In the 1960s, TMers—including initiators—had been told to practice TM and then simply “do what you know is right,” a directive that encouraged them to follow their own inclinations while trusting that their expanding consciousness would lead them in the right direction. But in later years that directive had changed. Pronouncements from Maharishi—regardless of the concern of life they addressed—were now conflated with directives toward protecting the continuously emphasized “purity of the teaching.”¹ Consequently, all behavior of *insiders* adopted an ideal form that became disdainful of personal initiatives. Moreover, these required behaviors were overseen in Fairfield by Bevan Morris and other functionaries of Maharishi's university. Altogether these changes resulted in a further division in the ranks, with some *insiders* less “inside” than others. Those who were most inside, the true believers, who accepted any message from the guru and all directives from the TMO that came down to them, increasingly fell into disagreement with those who questioned authority or framed themselves as the loyal opposition. This gap grew so wide that eventually those in the latter group were sometimes excommunicated from TMO programs (including daily participation in the super radiance program at the golden domes) for challenging the TMO's authority.

Those who were most inside, whether they lived in Fairfield or obeyed all movement directives from afar, fell not only into Bainbridge and Stark's *cult movement* category but more accurately into a variety of it sometimes termed Neo-Hinduism—given that the main characteristics of their views and practices were derived from Hinduism.² Once free of dealing with the general public, Maharishi, beginning in 1980, increasingly synchronized his teachings with their original sources and forms, positing his worldview as “Vedic Science,” referencing the *Vedas*, the primary scriptures of Hinduism. Today this correlation has resulted in a full embrace for many *insiders*—including those who control the TMO—of Hindu holidays, Hindu scriptures, Hindu diets, Hindu rituals, Hindu astrology, etc. But the TMO continued to deny they were either “religious” or “Hindu,” preferring to use movement justifications for their cognitive dissonance. The details of this dynamic and its consequences are spelled out in *The Transcendental Meditation Movement* (Sawyer & Humes, 2023), our offering for Cambridge's Elements Series, and in Cynthia Humes' *Guru's in America* (2005).

Briefly, after Maharishi died on 5 February 2008, Dr. Anthony Nader, a Lebanese physician whom the guru had crowned Raja Nader Ram, literally became the king of Maharishi's global organization and the “Global Country of World Peace”—whose domain, according to their website, is “CONSCIOUSNESS” itself (www.globalcountry.org/wp/). The TMO's programs continue to this day, in dwindling form, and TM continues to be taught to the public—mainly through the efforts of the David Lynch Foundation (DLF).

David Lynch began practicing TM in the 1970s and later became a major supporter of Maharishi's programs, forming the DLF that today offers “Quiet Time” programs to promote TM in schools. The DLF's success has been limited because its efforts continue to raise concerns over the separation of Church and State, often inciting public backlash (Siegel, 2018, pp. 148–151). Related to Bainbridge and Stark's categories, the TMO and DLF generally reference the attitude of the *audience cult* TMers toward Maharishi's teachings as justification for TM not being a religious practice. Those *outsiders*, who learned TM as they may also have learned yoga or Pilates at their local YMCA, had not embraced Maharishi's full spectrum of teachings and directives, so their attitude toward TM is presented to school authorities as definitive proof that TM is not religious. But the fact remains that *insiders*—especially of the most “inside” variety—fit the majority of descriptors related to NRMs, including such other Hinduism-inspired movements as the Hare Krishnas and Rajneeshis. “Maharishi began with a universalist stance,... and has moved to an ever more particularist stance, gradually embedding the Hindu/Vedic religion year by year as successive unveilings of the most accurate vision of true religion” (Humes, 2005, p. 72).

Back in the 1960s and early 1970s, the TM movement held—as its prime directive—teaching TM to as many people as possible. They called it the “World Plan,” and that project fits well with Roy Wallis' category of NRMs

that believe in the perfectible nature of human beings (2003, pp. 48–49). Rather than changing society via new institutions, the TMO hoped to enlighten society by transforming the individuals who made it up, one person at a time. “A forest is only as green as the individual trees in the forest are green,” Maharishi often commented in lectures to his teachers. But after 1979, the focus shifted away from public programs toward changing society via super radiance, broadcast from the golden domes in Iowa. This shift made physical a separation between *insider* TMers and *outsider* TMers that continues today, and where the TM movement will go in the future remains unclear. Several trends are reported in our book, including that the success of the TMO has greatly waned—with reports of daily practitioners in the domes having been reduced to three hundred or less—while breakaway organizations are on the rise.

Even before the death of Maharishi in 2008, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar—once Maharishi’s close disciple—had developed an autonomous organization, The Art of Living Foundation (artofliving.org) that today may enjoy greater success than the TMO (for example as evidenced by their claim that over 450,000 people registered for their recent “World Culture Festival” in Washington D.C. on 29 September 2023). Moreover, other, less well-known autonomous groups have broken away, including Thom Knoles’ Vedic Meditation organization, the International Teachers of Meditation Association (made up of ex-initiators offering what they term “effortless deep meditation”), and the Meditation Trust, the latter established as a registered charity in the United Kingdom. In addition, several social media webpages have been established on Facebook by ex-TM insiders discussing possible new directions, including (at the time of publication of this article) “TM: The Next Generation,” hosted by Bryan Lee (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/335426281637061>) and “Meditating Fairfield, Iowa,” hosted by Doug Hamilton (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/3041658679220545>). Again, where these new groups and initiatives will lead is unclear, but it is evident that the original movement is now, more than ever, waning and fragmenting.

The TM movement was not only the most successful New Age movement ever to develop in America, in terms of number of practitioners, but it also established in the American mind the connection between meditation practice and well-being. Today, there are a range of meditation techniques available to those interested, but all of them have depended on the interest and *cache* first established by the TM movement. Furthermore, related to Transcendental Meditation specifically, though there have been substantial charges against the validity of scientific studies related to TM’s value (e.g., see Park, 2000), there is little doubt that claims of the restfulness created by the practices—and the attendant value of restfulness for health—are valid. Several *outsider* TMers, who regularly meditate, and who, as a group, may number today as many as 250,000, reported during interviews for our book that they enjoyed TM as they might enjoy a nap or a bit of alone time, and several interviewees claimed it had noticeably improved their health—at least by pulling them away from earlier bad habits. Today, meditation is a facet of American life in ways that could not have been imagined 50 years ago, and TM had a great deal to do with establishing that trend.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/rec3.12482>.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ All unattributed quotes in this article are taken directly from the voluminous notes Sawyer was required to take from Maharishi’s lectures to become a TM teacher.
- ² These western religious movements inspired by Hinduism have sometimes been termed “New Age Hinduism.” Note also, “Neo-Hinduism” is a term that was originally applied—for instance by Robert Antoine and Paul Hacker—to the Hindu Reform movements of India in the 19th Century. However, today we also find “Neo-Hindu” and “Neo-Hinduism” applied to movements involving mainly westerners that have arisen from Hindu sources (for instance, see the wikipedia entry for “Hinduism in the West”), and this term seems more descriptively accurate to us today than “New Age Hinduism.”

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